

CALL FROM AN ANGEL

by

Guillaume Musso



English translation by Jeffrey Probst for submission purposes only

Original title: L'Appel de l'ange

© XO Editions, 2011

The shore is safer, but I love to buffet the sea.

-Emily Dickinson

Prologue

A cell phone?

You weren't really sure what the fuss was all about at first, but you didn't want everyone to think you were some old fuddy duddy so you finally gave in and decided to get one of those no-frill jobs with the basic calling plan. When you first started using it, you'd sometimes realize you were talking too loud at a restaurant, on the train or at a sidewalk café. It's true that it was handy. Plus it was reassuring to know that your family and friends were always just a phone call away.

Like everybody else, you eventually got the hang of texting with that dinky keypad, and pretty soon you were firing off one message after another. Like everybody else, you finally did away with your daily planner and address book and started using the one in your phone. You carefully typed in the numbers of everyone you knew: your family and friends, colleagues, and also your lover. You hid all your ex-boyfriends' numbers, and the PIN number for your debit card that you sometimes forgot.

Even though you could only take crappy pictures with your cell phone, you took pictures with it anyway. It was always nice to have something funny on hand to show to your coworkers.

Besides, you weren't alone. It was the object that defined the times: the boundaries between people's private, professional and social lives were becoming increasingly blurry, and these days you had to be able to do what you wanted at the drop of a hat. You had to be flexible and constantly juggle with your schedule.

*

Then a little while back, you traded in your old phone for a new model – a little technological marvel that you now use to read your email, surf the web and download hundreds of applications.

And now you're hooked. It's like an extra appendage that's been grafted onto your body, a part of you that goes wherever you do. Wherever you may be – in the bathroom, even on the toilet – you rarely let even half an hour pass without checking the screen to see if you've missed any calls, or if there's a new message from your friends or boyfriend. And if your mailbox is empty, then you click to check if there's any mail waiting to be received.

Like the little blankie you carried around when you were a kid, your telephone makes you feel nice and safe with its softly glowing screen, so soothing and hypnotic. It allows you to seem busy in any situation and provides the comfort of instant contact, leaving all options open...

*

But then one night when you get home, you dig through your pockets and your purse, only to realize you've lost your cell phone. Lost? Stolen? No, it can't be true. You look for it again but it still doesn't turn up. *I probably left it at the office*, you keep trying to convince yourself, but...no, you remember checking your messages in the elevator on your way out of the building and – most likely – in the subway and again in the bus.

Oh no!

First you're upset for losing the phone itself, but then you pat yourself on the back for having been so smart and subscribing to that "lost/stolen/damaged" insurance, and you immediately start counting up all those loyalty points you've earned from your operator and that you'll trade in first thing tomorrow morning to get one of those new high-tech smart phones with a touch-sensitive screen.

But then it's 3 a.m., and you still can't get to sleep....

*

You quietly slip out of bed, being careful not to wake up the man sleeping next to you.

In the kitchen, you pull down that old pack of cigarettes you keep hidden up in the cupboard just in case. You light one up and, what the hell, decide to have a glass of vodka to boot.

Damn...

You're slumped over in your chair, shivering because you've left the window open for the cigarette smoke.

You start going over everything that was in your telephone: a few videos, about fifty snapshots, the log of all the internet sites you browsed, your home address (including the code for the front door of your apartment building), your parents' address, the people in your Contacts who shouldn't really be in there, certain messages that might give someone the impression that—

Stop being so paranoid!

You take another drag of your cigarette and a gulp of vodka.

Actually, there isn't anything that would look all that compromising, but you also know that looks can be deceiving.

You can't help worrying, though. What if your phone has fallen into the wrong hands?

You're already wishing that you'd deleted some of those pictures and emails, and maybe a few of those text conversations. Stuff from your past, stuff about your family, financial situation, sex life...If someone who's out to get you really started digging through your phone, there's enough there to completely ruin your life. You wish you could turn back time, but that's of no use now.

You're really shivering now so you get up to close the window. You press your forehead against the glass and contemplate the smattering of lights still twinkling out there in the night, and you think: Someone, some man maybe, is out there somewhere in the city at this very moment, his eyes riveted to the screen of your telephone, gleefully digging up all the little details of your private life that you'd carefully buried away in there, methodically picking his way through the innards of your cell phone to discover all your *dirty little secrets*.

Part One

Cat and Mouse

The Exchange

There are those who are destined to cross paths. No matter where they are, or where they go. One day they will meet.
Claudie GALLAY

New York

JFK International Airport

One week before Christmas

HER

"Then what happened?"

"Then Raphael gave me a diamond ring from Tiffany's and asked me to marry him."

With her cell phone pressed against her ear, Madeline was pacing in front of the gigantic picture windows looking out onto the tarmac, while three thousand miles away in her one-bedroom apartment in north London, her best friend was greedily gobbling up all the details of Madeline's romantic weekend in the Big Apple.

"He really pulled out all the stops!" Juliane exclaimed. "A weekend in Manhattan, a room at the Waldorf, a carriage ride through Central Park and then he pops the question. Just like in the movies."

"Yeah," Madeline grinned. "Everything was perfect, just like in the movies."

"Maybe a bit too perfect?" her friend teased.

"Can you please explain to me how something can be *too* perfect, Ms. Stick-in-the-mud?"

"I just meant it doesn't sound like much of a *surprise*," Juliane said awkwardly, trying to redeem herself. "New York, Tiffany's, the ride through Central Park in the snow and the skating rink. He doesn't get many points for originality, does he?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Madeline retorted impishly, "but when Wayne asked you to marry him, wasn't it after a night out drinking with the boys? He was drunk as a sailor and ran off to the bathroom to puke just after he'd asked for your hand – or did I miss something?"

"Okay, you win." Juliane knew when she was beat.

Madeline couldn't suppress a smile as she approached the boarding area and started looking through the dense crowd for Raphael. The airport was a madhouse. Christmas vacation was getting into full swing and thousands of passengers were hurrying off to catch their flight, some to see their families for the holidays, others to bask in the sun in some faraway paradise, worlds away from the cold and damp of New York.

"So you still haven't told me what your answer was!"

"Are you kidding? I said 'yes' of course!"

"You didn't keep him in suspense at all?"

"In suspense? Listen Jul', I'm almost thirty-four years old! Don't you think I've waited long enough as it is? I love Raphael, we've been together for two years now and we're trying to have a baby. In just a few weeks we're moving into the new place we picked out together. For the first time in my life, I think I've found someone who really wants to take care of me. I'm happy, Juliane."

"You're saying that because he's standing right next to you, is that it?"

"No!" Madeline laughed loudly. "He went to check in our bags. I'm saying it because it's true!"

She tarried in front of a newsstand. The headlines all painted the same bleary picture of a world spinning out of control. The countdown to disaster had begun: financial crises, skyrocketing unemployment, the latest round of political scandals, social unrest, ecological catastrophes...where would it all end?

Juliane wasn't done yet: "Aren't you worried your life will become too predictable with Raphael?"

"What's wrong with predictable?" Madeline shot back. "I need someone solid and reliable, someone I can count on. Everything is so crazy and uncertain in the world, here today gone tomorrow. I don't want that in my relationship. When I come home at night I want to find peace and serenity. You know what I mean?"

"Huh," was all Juliane replied.

"There's no more time for *huhs* Jul'. So you better start shopping for your bridesmaid's dress!"

"Huh," her friend repeated, but more to conceal how moved she was than to play the devil's advocate.

Madeline glanced at her watch. Outside the window, the big white planes were lined up on the runway, each waiting its turn to fly off to the heavens.

"Listen, I have to go. My plane's supposed to takeoff at 5:30 and I still haven't found my...my husband!"

"Your *future* husband," Juliane laughed. "And I hope your next little getaway will be to come see me in London. Why don't you stop over this weekend?"

"I would love to, but I'm way too busy. We're flying into Charles de Gaulle early tomorrow morning and I'll barely have time for a quick shower back home before I open the shop."

"You're quite the busy body!"

"I run a flower shop, Jul! Christmas is one of my busiest times of year!"

"Well, try to get some sleep during the flight at least."

"Okay, I'll call you tomorrow," Madeline promised before hanging up.

*

HIM

"Save your breath, Francesca, it's out of the question that we see each other!"

"But I'm right at the bottom of the stairs, just a few yards away from you."

With his cell phone pressed against his ear, Jonathan scowled as he walked up to the railing overlooking the escalator. A striking young woman with long dark hair stood at the bottom. She held her telephone to her ear with one hand and with the other grasped the hand of a small boy smothered in a parka a size too big for him. She wore low-cut jeans, a fitted down coat and large designer sunglasses that masked much of her serenely beautiful face.

Jonathan waved his arm at his son, who timidly raised his hand in return.

"Send up Charlie and clear off!" he snapped angrily.

Each time it was the same. Just the sight of his ex-wife filled him with rage and pain. The same powerful emotions, the same mixture of despair and hostility.

"You must stop talking to me like that!" she protested, her voice betraying a slight Italian accent.

"Don't you try to lecture me!" he bellowed. "You made your choice and now you'll just have to live with it. You betrayed your family, Francesca! You betrayed me and you betrayed Charlie!"

"Leave Charlie out of it!"

"Leave him out of it? When he's the one who's had to pay the price? It's because of your escapades that he only gets to see his own father a few weeks a year!"

"I'm sorry that-"

"And what about the airplane?" he continued, his voice rising. "Need I remind you why he's so afraid to take the airplane all by himself? Which leaves me no choice but to fly clear across the continent to pick him up for his school break!"

"What happened to us is...is part of life, Jonathan. We're both adults, it's not about who was right and who was wrong."

"That's not what the judge said," he snapped. But all the energy had suddenly drained out of his voice. Did it really matter anymore that the divorce ruling had been in his favor?

Jonathan looked thoughtfully at the tarmac out the window. It was only 4:30 but night was already approaching. Jumbo jets were lined up beside the brightly-lit runways, each waiting for the signal from the control tower to fly off to Barcelona, Hong Kong, Sydney, Paris...the number of airplanes was incredible.

"Listen, we've said enough," he finally said. "School starts on January 3rd. I'll be back with Charlie the day before."

"Fine. One last thing: I bought a cell phone for Charlie. I have to be able to reach him at all times."

"Are you kidding me! Out of the question!" he replied, the rage quickly returning to his voice. "Seven year-old boys do not have cell phones."

"That's open to discussion," she asserted.

"Exactly, it's something that should be discussed. You had no right to make the decision without me. Maybe we'll talk about it another time, but for now, you put away that gadget and send Charlie up here this instant!"

"Okay," she replied softly.

Jonathan bent over the railing, his eyes riveted on his son. He could just make out Charlie handing over a small brightly-colored phone to Francesca. The little boy kissed his mother and then awkwardly got on the escalator.

Jonathan pushed his way through the throng of travelers to meet his son at the top.

"Hey Dad."

"How's my big boy?" Jonathan asked as he gathered him into his arms.

*

HIM & HER

Madeline's fingers flew quickly over the keypad as she window-shopped in the Duty Free area. She barely glanced at the screen as she texted her answer back to Raphael. He had finished checking in their bags, but now was stuck in the security line. She told him to meet her in the food court.

"Dad, I'm kinda hungry. Can I please have a *panini*?" Charlie politely asked his father. Jonathan rested his hand on his son's shoulder as he walked him through the glass-and-steel labyrinth that led to the departure gates. He hated airports, especially at this time of year – Christmas and airports reminded him of that horrible time two years back when he'd found out that Francesca was cheating on him. But he was so happy to be back with his son that he grabbed Charlie by the waist and threw him up in the air.

"One *panini* coming right up, Sir!" said Jonathan, his spirits already beginning to rise as he veered off towards the restaurant area.

The Skyway was the biggest food court in the terminal, with restaurants offering all sorts of specialty foods arranged around a central atrium.

A brownie or a piece of pizza? Madeline hesitated as she scanned the buffet. A piece of fruit would have been a much more sensible choice of course, but she was dying of hunger. She set the brownie on her platter, then quickly put it back on the shelf as the little Jiminy Cricket on her shoulder began whispering the number of calories it must contain. With little enthusiasm, she grabbed an apple out of a wicker basket, ordered a lemon tea and walked over to the cashier.

Ciabatta bread, pesto, dried tomatoes, Parma ham and mozzarella cheese: Charlie's mouth was watering as he ogled his Italian sandwich. Jonathan had brought his son into the kitchen of his restaurant before the boy

could even walk, and Charlie had developed a taste for good food and a keen interest in all sorts of new flavors.

"Hold on tight to your platter, okay?" Jonathan told him as they left the cash register.

Charlie nodded, intent on keeping his sandwich and bottle of water from tipping over. The platter wobbled in his small hands.

The dining area, a long oval room with a glass wall overlooking the runways, was packed.

"Where should we sit, Dad?" asked Charlie, who looked lost in the sea of travelers.

Jonathan looked about anxiously. A dense crowd was jostling amongst the tables and chairs. There were clearly way more diners than available spots. Then miraculously he spotted a group leaving a table right next to the window.

"Full speed ahead, captain!" he exclaimed to Charlie as he nodded at the table.

They were hurriedly making their way through the noisy crowd when Jonathan heard his cell phone ring. He hesitated for a second, with his wheeled travel bag in one hand and his platter in the other, but then began fumbling with his jacket pocket to pull out the phone. When all of a sudden –

The place is packed! Madeline groaned as she saw the crowds of travelers streaming into the dining area. She had been hoping to unwind for a few minutes before her flight, and now she wouldn't even be able to sit down!

Ouch! She stifled a cry after a careless teenager stepped on her foot without even apologizing.

Rotten kid! she steamed, glaring at the young girl. The teenager slightly raised her middle finger. The meaning couldn't have been any clearer.

Madeline didn't even have time to ponder the affront: she had spotted a free table right next to the window! She made a beeline through the crowd, praying that no one would beat her to the spot. When she was just a few feet from the promised land her cell phone began vibrating in her purse.

Not now!

She decided not to answer, but then thought better: it was probably Raphael, wondering where she was. She tried awkwardly to hold her platter in one hand – *I can't believe how heavy this stupid teapot is!* – while she dug

through her purse for her phone, which was of course buried beneath a huge bunch of keys, her daily planner and the novel she'd been reading. She twisted herself into an awkward position to answer the phone when suddenly—

*

Madeline and Jonathan were both in full stride when they crashed into each other. Everything – the teapot, apple, sandwich, bottle of Coke and glass of wine – flew up into the air before crashing down on the floor.

The collision caught Charlie completely unawares. Now his platter dropped out of his hands as well and the boy began crying.

Stupid idiot! Jonathan fumed to himself as he tried to regain his composure.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" he yelled.

What a moron! Madeline seethed as she came to her senses.

"Oh, so it's all my fault?" she shot right back. "You ran right into me, chum!" She bent over and began collecting her telephone, her purse and her keys.

Jonathan turned towards his son to reassure him, then bent over to pick up the plastic-wrapped sandwich, the bottle of water and his cell phone.

Up in arms now, he turned back to Madeline: "I saw the table first! We were just about to sit down when you plowed into us without even – "

"Are you kidding? I saw the table way before you did!"

Her angry voice betrayed a slight English accent, imperceptible up until then.

"That's beside the point! You're alone and I've got a child with me!"

"Oh that's a good one! You think because you're travelling with your kid that you can just run right through me – and ruin my blouse?" Madeline rejoined as she noticed the wine stain on her wrap top.

Jonathan could only shake his head. He raised his eyes to the ceiling with a look of dismay.

"And I'm not alone either," she added, noticing Raphael making his way through the crowd.

"C'mon Charlie, we'll find a seat somewhere else. She's obviously not worth our time," he said over his shoulder as they walked off.

*

Delta flight 4565 left New York for San Francisco at 5 p.m. Jonathan was so happy to be with his son that he didn't even see the time pass. Ever since his parents' divorce, Charlie was terrified by airplanes. It was impossible

for him to travel alone or to sleep during a flight. So the two of them spent the five hours catching up, horsing around and watching *Lady and the Tramp* on the laptop computer for about the twentieth time while pigging out on little buckets of Haagen-Dazs ice cream. Normally the desert was reserved for business class, but a friendly stewardess hadn't been able to resist the little boy's cherubic face or his father's clumsy charm. She had been only too happy to make an exception.

Air France flight 29 departed from JFK at 5:30 p.m. Comfortably installed in her business class seat – Raphael had certainly taken care of every last detail – Madeline turned on her camera and began scrolling through the pictures of their weekend in New York. Pressed tightly together, the two lovebirds relived the highlights of their trip, which had all the makings of an early honeymoon. When Raphael began to doze off, Madeline selected *The Shop Around the Corner* from the airplane's video-on-demand system. Even though she'd seen it about a hundred times, she still loved watching the old Lubitsch comedy.

With the time difference, it wasn't even 9 p.m. when Jonathan's plane touched down in San Francisco.

Now that they were safely on the ground, all of Charlie's tension finally drained away and he was asleep in his father's arms almost before they reached the gate.

In the arrivals terminal, Jonathan began looking around for Marcus, his friend who helped him run a small French restaurant in North Beach and who was supposed to pick them up in his car. Jonathan stood on his tiptoes and surveyed the crowds.

"Up to your old tricks again, huh Marcus?" he grumbled to himself.

He finally gave up hope and decided to check his cell phone for any messages. As soon as he deactivated the "airplane" mode a long text message appeared on the screen:

| |
|--|
| Welcome back to Paris, my dear! I hope you got some rest on the flight and Raphael didn't snore too much ;-) |
|--|

Sorry about the way I reacted earlier: I'm absolutely thrilled that you're getting married and that you've found the man who'll make you happy. I promise I'll do my utmost to fill my solemn and time-honored role as bridesmaid to your complete satisfaction!

Your best friend for life, Juliane

What the hell...? Jonathan read through the message again. Another one of Marcus's stupid pranks? At first he was sure it was the case, but then he took a closer look at his phone: same model, same color, but...it wasn't his phone! He checked the phone's email application and it didn't take long for him to figure out who it belonged to: a certain Madeline Greene, who lived in Paris.

Oh damn! he cursed. *That airhead back at JFK!*

Madeline glanced at her watch and stifled a yawn. It was 6:30 in the morning. The flight had only taken about seven hours, but with the time difference it was now early Saturday morning in Paris. The Charles de Gaulle Airport was already a flurry of activity. Just like in New York, a stampede of travelers eager to get their vacations started had overrun the airport at the crack of dawn.

"Are you sure you want to go to work today?" Raphael asked her as they waited for their bags.

"Of course, *chéri!*" Madeline turned on her cell phone to check her mail. "I'll bet I've already got plenty of orders to fill."

She decided to listen to her voice mail first. The first message was from a complete stranger. Judging by his voice, he sounded like he was half asleep or in a complete daze:

"Hey John, how's it going? It's Marcus...uhhh, I've got a little problem with the Renault. It's no big deal, just a little oil leak...uhhh, listen I'll explain it all later. Anyway, just wanted you to know I might be a little late. Sorry man."

Madeline hung up her phone. *Who's this crank? Must've been a wrong number. Huh.*

She could sense that something was wrong. Madeline took a closer look at the phone: same brand, same model...but it wasn't hers.

"Bloody hell!" she cried out. "It's that lunatic's phone from the airport!"

Separate Lives

It's dreadful to be a single person, when once
you were two.
Paul MORAND

It was Jonathan who texted Madeline first:

I have your phone. Do you have mine?
Jonathan Lempereur

The reply wasn't long in coming...

Yes! Where are you?
Madeline Greene

In San Francisco. And you?

In Paris :(
Now what do we do?

Well, they do have post offices in France, don't
they?
I'll Fed-Ex your phone tomorrow.

Very kind of you...I'll do the same ASAP. What's your address?

French Touch Restaurant
1606 Stockton Street
San Francisco, CA

Here's mine:
Le Jardin Extraordinaire
3 bis, rue Delambre in Paris,
in the 16th arrondissement

You're a florist if I'm not mistaken? If so, you've got an urgent order from a certain Oleg Mordhorov: a delivery of 200 red roses to the Châtelet Theater for the actress who takes off her clothes in Act 3. If you ask me, she's probably not his wife...

Who gave you permission to listen to my voice mail?

I'm just trying to help, you blasted fool!

I see you're just as rude in text messages as you are in person!
You own a restaurant Jonathan, correct?

Yes.

Then your dive's got a new reservation: table for two

tomorrow night, a Mr. and Mrs. Strzechowski or some such thing – that's all I could gather from the message. Poor reception...

Got it. Good night.

In Paris it's 7 a.m.

Jonathan could only groan as he read her snippy reply, and slipped her phone back into his jacket pocket. She really knew how to get under his skin!

*

San Francisco

9:30 p.m.

The bright-red Renault 4L that turned off Highway 101 and took the downtown exit had obviously seen better days. The old crate crept along the Embarcadero so slowly it looked like it was moving in slow motion. The heat was turned on full blast, but the windows were still dripping with condensation.

"You're going to get us killed with this hunk of junk!" groaned Jonathan, who had somehow managed to cram himself into the cramped front seat.

"C'mon man, listen to that baby purr!" Marcus said in defense of his precious car. "You gotta give her some lovin'."

With his serious case of bedhead, shaggy eyebrows, three-week old beard and droopy eyelids, Marcus looked like he'd been teleported straight from a cave dwelling – unless he was having a bad day, then it was more like from another galaxy. The baggy pants and Hawaiian shirt he wore open down to his navel were both about eight sizes too big for his scrawny body, which he'd somehow disjointed in order to wedge himself behind the steering wheel. He was wearing an old pair of tongs on his feet, only using one to drive the car. He

kept his heel firmly planted on the clutch, and moved his toes back and forth between the brake and the accelerator.

"I think Uncle Marcus's car is totally cool!" gushed Charlie as he bounced around in the back seat.

Marcus gave him a wink. "Thanks man!"

"Put on your seatbelt Charlie!" Jonathan said. "And could you please settle down back there?" He looked over at Marcus: "Did you go over to the restaurant this afternoon?"

"Uhh...aren't we closed today?"

"Yes, Marcus, we're closed today. Don't tell me you weren't there to pick up the duck they were supposed to deliver?"

"What duck?"

"The duck breasts and arugula that Bob Woodmark delivers every Friday!"

"Oh yeah! I knew there was something I was supposed to do today!"

"You jackass!" Jonathan was beside himself. "How could you possibly forget to do the one thing that I told you to remember?"

"Okay, okay...it's not the end of the world," Marcus grumbled.

"No, you're wrong! I know Woodmark's a pain in the ass but all our best produce comes from his farm. If he showed up and nobody was there he'll never forgive us! He'll probably cross us off his list. Let's go straight to the restaurant. I'll bet you he left the delivery around back."

"Let me take care of it," Marcus said, doing his best to reassure his partner. "First I'll drop you guys off back at the hou—"

"No." Jonathan was adamant. "You're a deadbeat Marcus and I was a fool to count on you. I'll do it myself."

"But Charlie's beat!"

"No I'm not!" Charlie was only too happy with the change in plans. "I wanna go to the restaurant too!"

"See? It's all settled then." Jonathan began wiping his sleeve across the damp windshield. "Take the side road to Third Street."

Marcus veered sharply towards the exit, but apparently his "little baby" wasn't all that fond of sudden movements. The car skidded on the pavement and they just barely avoided an accident.

"You and this car are a public safety hazard!" Jonathan yelled. "Jesus, you're going to get us killed!"

"I'm doing my best!" Marcus yelped as he righted the car amidst a raucous symphony of blasting horns.

The car had managed to regain a semblance of stability by the time they'd reached Kearney Street.

After a long silence, Marcus asked: "Is it because you saw my sister again that you're so worked up?"

"Francesca is only your *half*sister."

"Well, how's she doing?"

Jonathan scowled at his friend. "Do you think we sat down and had a heart-to-heart?"

Marcus knew he was heading into dangerous waters. He didn't pursue the matter and decided instead to focus on his driving. They finally arrived at Columbus Avenue and he parked the 4L in front of a French bistro on the corner of Union and Stockton streets. The sign out front read *French Touch*.

Jonathan had been right: Bob Woodmark had left his delivery in the courtyard behind the restaurant. The two of them carried the crates into the walk-in cooler and then made sure everything was in order in the dining room.

French Touch was a little piece of France right in the heart of North Beach, the Italian neighborhood in San Francisco. Small and cozy, the restaurant recreated the atmosphere of a 1930s French bistro with wood furnishing, ceiling moldings, tiled floors with mosaics, huge Belle Epoque mirrors, and old posters of Josephine Baker, Maurice Chevalier and Edith Piaf. The menu was traditional French cooking, straightforward and unpretentious. The chalkboard on the wall displayed the current special: "Puff pastry with snails and honey sauce; Duck breast *à l'orange*; Chocolate mousse."

Charlie took a seat at the gleaming metal counter that ran the length of the dining room. "Can I have some ice cream, Dad?"

"Sorry buddy, but you already had tons of ice cream on the airplane. It's way past your bedtime anyway so we should get going."

"But I'm on vacation," Charlie pleaded.

"C'mon Jon, don't be uncool," Marcus added.

"Oh no, don't you start now!"

"But it's Christmas!"

John couldn't repress a smile. "How can I win against *two* little kids?"

He went behind the counter running along the back corner of the restaurant, where it opened onto the kitchen so that the diners could see the cooks at work.

"Well then, what can I get for you, Sir?" he asked his son.

"A hot fudge sundae!"

The "chef" got to work: with sure hands, he crumbled a few squares of chocolate into a small pan and started heating it in a double boiler.

"What would you like, Marcus?"

"I thought maybe we could open a bottle of wine..." he said hopefully, his voice trailing off.

"If you want."

Marcus's face lit up with joy. He jumped up from his seat and headed off to his favorite spot in the restaurant: the wine cellar.

Charlie's hungry eyes followed his father's every movement as he put two scoops of vanilla ice cream in a dish and topped them off with whipped cream. When the chocolate sauce was fully melted, he mixed in a spoonful of fresh cream and then poured it over the ice cream. He added a second helping of whipped cream and then, for the finishing touch, sprinkled on some grilled almonds.

He stuck a small paper umbrella in the cream and slid it over to Charlie: "*Voila!*"

Father and son took a seat side-by-side in one of the cozy booths along the wall. Charlie was in heaven as he dug into his sundae with a long-handled spoon.

Marcus returned from his treasure hunt. "Get a load of *this!*" he exclaimed.

"A 1997 Screaming Eagle! Are you out of your mind? Those bottles are for the customers!"

"Aw c'mon Jon! We can say it's my Christmas present."

Jonathan put up some token resistance before acquiescing, and Marcus gleefully opened the legendary vintage.

All things considered, it was probably better if Marcus drank a few glasses here at the restaurant, where at least he could keep an eye on him. If he turned off the faucet, Marcus might pay a visit to a few of his favorite watering holes, and when he'd had a few too many he was a disaster waiting to happen. His drinking buddies often took advantage of his gullibility and his good nature. More than once they had fleeced him at poker and made him sign exorbitant IOUs, leaving Jonathan with the onerous task of covering his debts.

"Behold the color of this nectar!" Marcus said gleefully as he poured the wine into a decanter.

Marcus was the illegitimate son of Francesca's father, a wealthy New York businessman, and a country music singer from Quebec. He hadn't touched a cent after his father's death. His mother had recently passed away and he only maintained distant ties with his half-sister. He lived in his own devil-may-care world, completely ignorant of the rules of propriety and polite society. He slept twelve hours a day and only occasionally popped in to help out at the restaurant. All duties and obligations seemed completely foreign to him. He was a good-natured, penniless goofball, a sweet and simple soul. A bit pathetic, true, but also completely disarming. Still, it was exhausting for Jonathan to have to deal with his total lack of responsibility on a daily basis.

While he was married to Francesca, Jonathan had always considered Marcus to be his wife's moronic brother, someone who couldn't possibly be of any interest. But strangely enough, Marcus had been the only one there for him after Francesca had left him – unless you count his friends Jack Daniels and Johnnie Walker, who had also kept him company a bit too often. Even his love for his son hadn't prevented Jonathan from sinking into a black hole of depression. Her betrayal had caught him completely off guard, leaving him utterly defenseless against the suffering and pain that had slowly consumed him.

And then, inexplicably, Marcus had miraculously woken up from his dazed stupor and, for the first time in his life, taken charge of the situation. He had spotted a rundown Italian restaurant that had recently changed hands, and had bent over backwards to convince the new owners to transform the space into a French bistro and let his brother-in-law run the kitchen. Thanks to Marcus, Jonathan had gotten back on his feet. But once he sensed that Jonathan was on the road to recovery, Marcus had immediately resumed his old routine as the incurable deadbeat.

Marcus handed Jonathan a glass of wine. "Cheers!"

"Looks like Christmas has come early this year," he remarked as he switched on the Art Deco radio he'd picked up at a flea market in Pasadena. He left it on a station playing a live version of *Light My Fire*.

"That's the stuff!" Marcus exclaimed as he got comfortable in the booth, without making it clear whether he meant the cabernet or The Doors.

Jonathan unbuttoned his shirt collar and slipped off his jacket, doing his best to relax. Then his eyes fell on Madeline's cell phone on the table and

his blood pressure began rising again. *Bet I'll lose a bunch of reservations because of this mess!* He sighed as he thought of all the regular customers he'd given his personal number to so they could be sure to have a table on even the busiest nights.

Marcus picked up the phone while Jonathan contemplated his son slowly drifting off to sleep. It would have been great to take a couple weeks off to spend more time with Charlie, but he couldn't afford it. He had just barely climbed out of the financial hole he'd dug for himself a couple years back. There had been one good thing about the whole fiasco, though: he had become absolutely allergic to any sort of debt, overdrawn bank account, unpaid bill or late fee.

His fatigue was starting to catch up with him as well. He closed his eyes, and the image of Francesca at the airport suddenly appeared in his mind. Two years later, the pain was still intense, almost unbearable. His eyes snapped back open and he took a sip of wine to chase away the image. No, his life may not have turned out the way he'd wanted. But it was still his life nonetheless.

"Hey, she's kinda cute!" Marcus's dirty fingers were sliding over the touch-sensitive screen as he scrolled through the pictures on the phone.

Jonathan suddenly perked up and bent over the screen. "Really? Let me see."

In the picture file were some playfully erotic shots of the young woman taken in black-and-white: lacy lingerie, silk garters, a hand coyly covering a breast, fingertips lightly caressing the curve of her thigh. Nothing too outrageous though, especially nowadays with so many people posting their sex tapes on the web...

"Can I see, Dad?" Charlie asked, suddenly wide awake.

"No. No, go back to sleep. It's not for kids."

How funny. The stylish, stuck-up little snob at the airport had posed for her own set of erotic pictures.

More surprised than titillated, Jonathan zoomed in on the model's face. It looked as if she was enjoying herself and had willingly played her part. And yet, something seemed not quite natural about her smile. He could sense a certain uneasiness. She'd probably given in to the whims of her boyfriend, who'd decided he was the next Helmut Newton. He wondered who had taken

the pictures: Her husband? Her lover? Jonathan thought he recalled seeing a man at the airport, but he couldn't remember what he looked like.

"Okay, that's enough!" He set the phone back down on the table. Marcus looked disappointed.

Jonathan suddenly felt like a voyeur. "We have no right to snoop through her private life like that."

"Do you think she'd hesitate a second before doing the same thing?"

"I couldn't care less. Besides, there's no chance she'll find any pictures like that on my phone!" he added loudly as he reached for the bottle. "You don't think I go around snapping pictures of my pecker do you?"

The cabernet was exquisite, with hints of red fruit and gingerbread. As he savored his drink, Jonathan starting making a mental list of everything that was on his cell phone. The truth be told, he had no idea what was in its memory.

Anyway, there's nothing too personal or compromising.

But he couldn't have been more wrong.

*

Paris

7:30 a.m.

The sleek new Jaguar XF glided through the steely blue dawn as it travelled along the ring road outside Paris. It was a cold morning, but with its white leather upholstery, burr walnut veneer and brushed aluminum trim, the car offered a protective haven of pure luxury. In the back seat, Monogram canvas luggage sat next to a golf bag and a copy of *Vogue*.

"Are you sure you want to open your shop today?" Raphael asked Madeline for about the tenth time.

"Honey, we've already talked enough about this!"

But he wasn't giving up that easily. "Why don't we drive straight through to Deauville? We could spend a night at the *Normandy* and have lunch tomorrow with my parents."

"I would love to, but....I can't. Plus you have a meeting with your client at the worksite."

"Okay," he replied as he turned onto Boulevard Jourdan. "Whatever you say."

They passed through Denfert-Rochereau, Montparnasse, Raspail and just about every other part of the 14th arrondissement before he stopped the car in front of the bottle-green door of her apartment building at No. 13, Rue Campagne-Première.

"Do you want me to pick you up at the shop tonight?"

"No, that's okay. I'll take my motorcycle and meet you later."

"You'll freeze to death!"

"You're probably right," she said as she leaned towards him for a kiss, "but I miss driving my Triumph!"

The two lovers lingered in each other's arms until the loud horn of an impatient taxi driver woke them from their reveries.

Madeline closed the car door and blew Raphael a kiss. She punched in the code and pushed open the porch door, then crossed the tree-lined courtyard that led to the garden-level apartment she'd been renting ever since she'd first arrived in Paris.

"Brrr! It must be twenty below in here!" She shivered as she walked into the small duplex. Like many of the buildings in her neighborhood, it had the characteristic features of an artist's studio from the late 1800s.

She lit a match to turn on the water heater, then snapped on her electric kettle to make some tea.

The former artist's studio had long ago been transformed into a pretty one-bedroom apartment, with a small kitchen and a mezzanine that served as a bedroom. All the vestiges of the place's original use – the high ceiling, wooden floors and large glass facade – gave it a distinctive charm.

Madeline turned on her favorite jazz station and checked that the radiators were turned on full blast. She sipped her tea and jumped from one foot to the other as she listened to Louis Armstrong blow his horn.

She took a quick shower, still shivering as she ran over to her closet to pull on a thermolactyl t-shirt, a pair of jeans and a heavy Shetland sweater. She grabbed a Mars bar for the road, put on her leather jacket and tied her warmest scarf around her neck.

It was barely 8 o'clock when she swung her leg over her bright yellow motorcycle. Her shop was close by, but she didn't want to come back home that

night before she went to meet Raphael. Hair blowing in the wind, she quickly covered the hundred or so yards to the corner. She loved her street. It was here where Rimbaud and Verlaine had written their poems, where Aragon and Elsa Triolet had lived their love story, and where Godard had immortalized the final scene of his first feature film, when a "breathless" Jean-Paul Belmondo collapsed on the street with a bullet in his back as his American fiancée looked on.

Madeline turned at Boulevard Raspail, took the Rue Delambre and stopped in front of her flower shop, *Le Jardin Extraordinaire*, which she had opened two years earlier.

She was apprehensive as she raised the iron curtain; the shop was her pride and joy, and she had never left it for such a long time. She had entrusted everything to Takumi, her Japanese trainee, who was in his final year at the floral art school in Paris.

She sighed with relief as soon as she walked in the door: Takumi had followed her instructions to the letter. He had picked up supplies the day before at the market in Rungis, and the shop was overflowing with fresh flowers: orchids, white tulips, lilies, poinsettias, Christmas roses, buttercups, mimosas, daffodils, and violets. The whole place was illuminated by the dazzling lights on the gigantic Christmas tree the two of them had decorated before her trip, and bunches of mistletoe and holly hung from the ceiling.

Madeline felt better already. She took off her jacket, put on her apron, gathered her tools – a clipper, watering can and a hoe – and happily got down to business. First she took care of the most urgent matters: cleaning the dead leaves off a ficus, repotting an orchid, and then pruning a bonsai.

When she had created her shop, Madeline had wanted it to be a magical place, a peaceful and protective haven far away from the aggressive and hostile city. She wanted her customers to forget all their daily worries as soon as they walked in the door, and during the Christmas season, she made sure the shop was especially enchanting. Her customers were quickly captivated by the familiar fragrances of their childhood and the time-honored traditions on display.

Once she'd finished with the "primary care", Madeline brought out the Christmas trees and placed them in front of the store, then opened the shop for business at nine o'clock sharp.

The first customer entered the store. Madeline smiled: there was an old saying that if the first customer was a man, business would be good that day. But her face clouded over when he told her what he was looking for: an anonymous bouquet of flowers to send to his wife. This was the new ploy that jealous husbands had devised to spy on their spouses. After the flowers arrived, he would keep an eye on his wife to see how she reacted. If she didn't say anything about the bouquet when she got home in the evening, he would then conclude that she was having an affair. The man paid and left the shop without even a glance at the flowers she'd selected for him. Madeline began composing the bouquet all by herself – Takumi would deliver it later that morning to a bank in the Rue Boulard – when suddenly the riff from *Jumpin' Jack Flash* resounded in the shop. Madeline frowned. The Rolling Stones song was coming from the pocket of her backpack, where she'd put that Jonathan guy's phone. She wondered if she should answer or not, but then it was already too late: the music stopped. A minute or so later she heard a muffled beep indicating the caller had left a message.

Madeline shrugged and went about her business: after all, she wasn't going to start listening to messages for some stranger. She had enough stuff to do! And what the heck did she care about that lout who'd been so rude to her anyway...?

But her curiosity finally got the better of her. She touched the screen and placed the phone against her ear. She heard a deep, hesitant voice – an American woman most likely, with a slight Italian accent, who was doing her best to hold back her tears.

Jonathan, it's me, Francesca. Please call me back. We have to talk, we have to...I know that I betrayed you, I know you don't understand why I ruined everything. Come back Jonathan, please...do it for Charlie. Do it for us. I love you...I know you'll never forget what's happened, but you'll forgive me. We only have one life, Jonathan, and you and I were meant to spend our lives together, and to have more children. We can carry on with our projects, and things can be just like they were before. Without you, life has no meaning...

The woman's voice, choked up with an indescribable sadness, left off there.

Madeline was stunned for a moment, shaken by the message and overcome with guilt. She could feel the goose pimples on her arms. She shuddered and set down the phone and all the misery it contained on the countertop.

Now what should she do?